

Lasting Footprints:
The Ghost Trains of Montcalm County

Michael J. Gilbert

HST 333

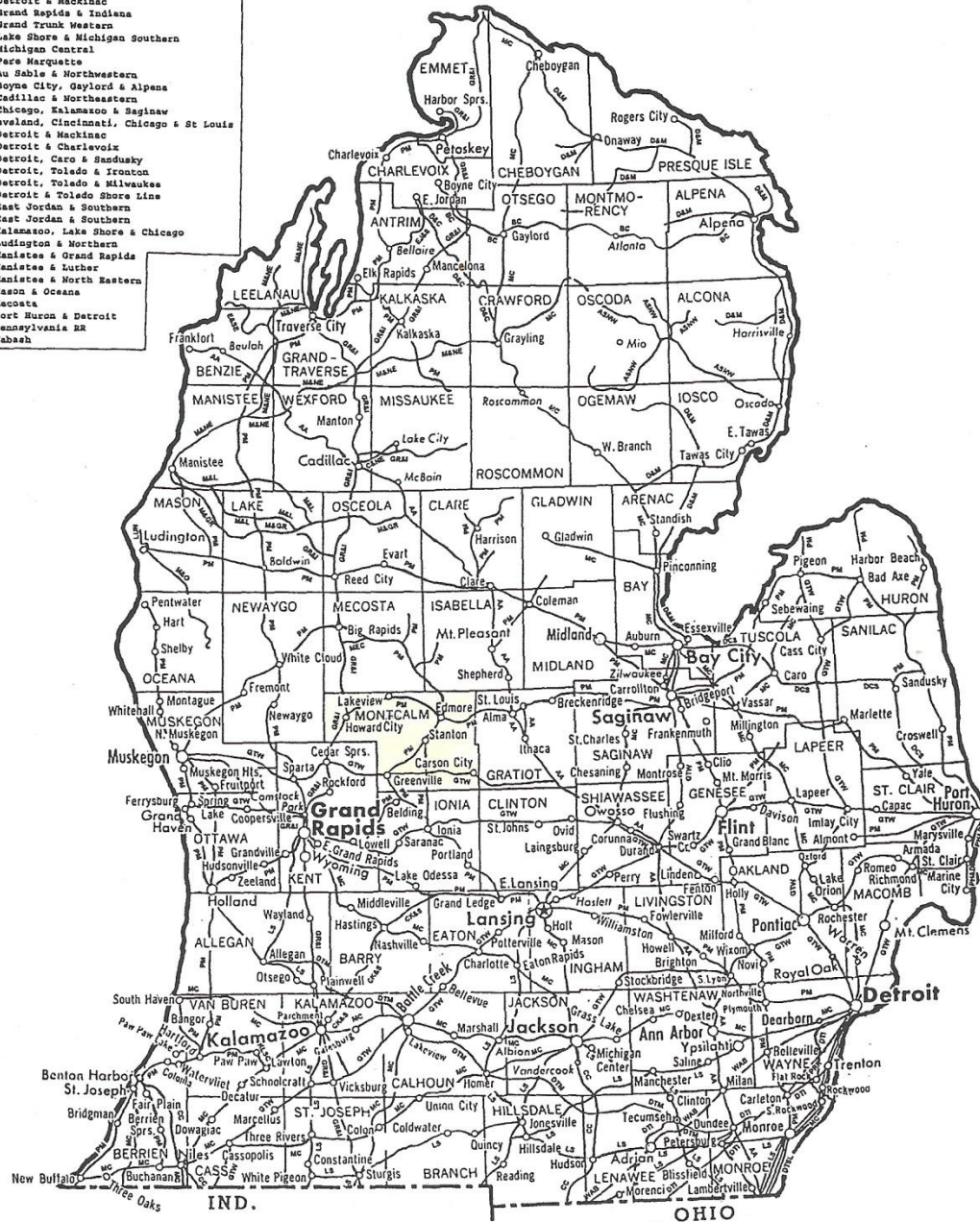
Dr. Timothy M O'Neil

19 April 2011

LOWER MICHIGAN

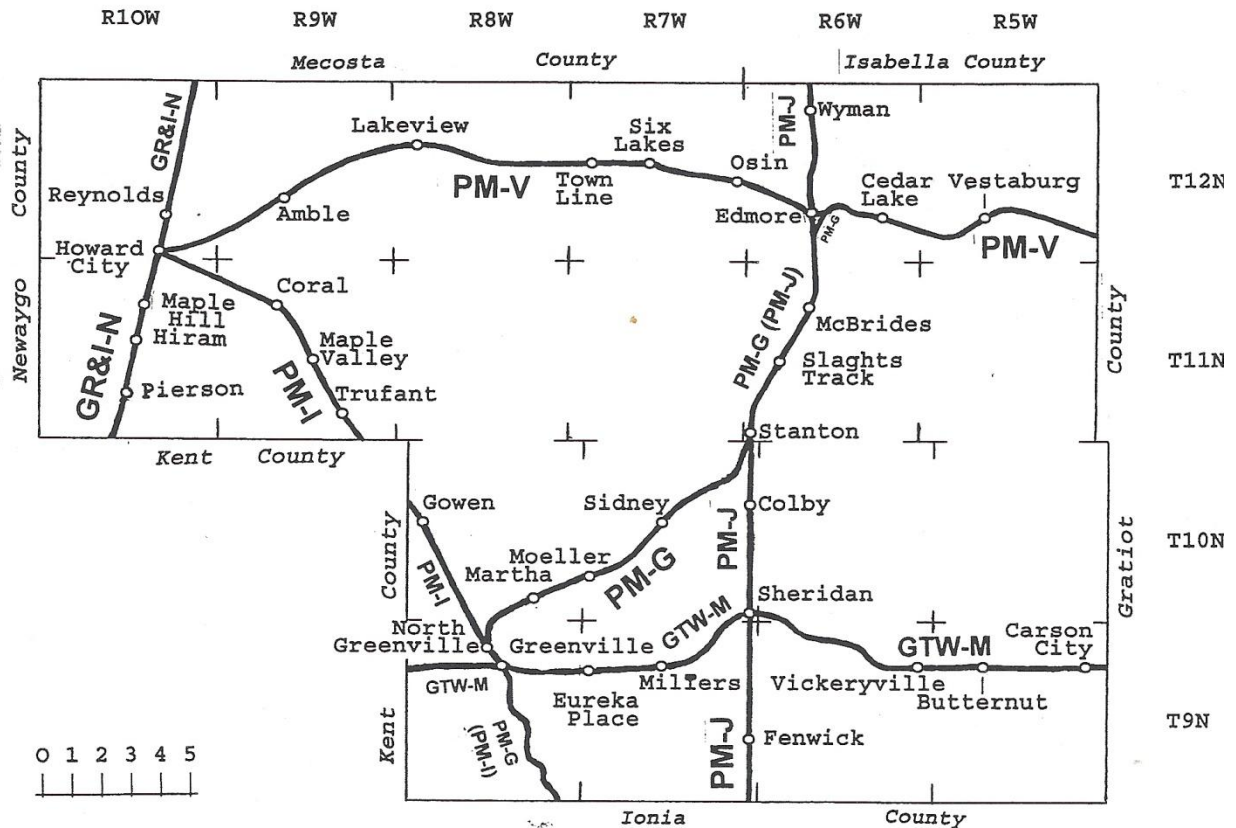
NOT SHOWN: ELECTRIC LINES, SMALL BRANCHES AND SPURS

RAIL LINES OF THE LOWER PENINSULA	
AA	- Ann Arbor
DAM	- Detroit & Mackinac
GRAT	- Grand Rapids & Indiana
GTW	- Grand Trunk Western
LS	- Lake Shore & Michigan Southern
MC	- Michigan Central
PM	- Pere Marquette
ASHN	- Au Sable & Northwestern
BC	- Boyne City, Gaylord & Alpena
CLNE	- Cadillac & Northwestern
CRS	- Chicago, Kalamazoo & Saginaw
CC	- Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chicago & St. Louis
DAM	- Detroit & Mackinac
DAC	- Detroit & Charlevoix
DCS	- Detroit, Caro & Sandusky
DTI	- Detroit, Toledo & Ironcon
DTM	- Detroit, Toledo & Milwaukee
DTSL	- Detroit & Toledo Shore Line
EJS	- East Jordan & Southern
EJS	- East Jordan & Southern
ELSC	- Kalamazoo, Lake Shore & Chicago
LUN	- Ludington & Northern
MAOR	- Manistee & Grand Rapids
MAL	- Manistee & Luther
MAWE	- Manistee & North Western
MAO	- Mason & Oceana
MCC	- Macosta
PHAD	- Port Huron & Detroit
PER	- Pennsylvania RR
WAB	- Wabash



Map 1: Railroad Lines in the State of Michigan. ©Meints 2005.

MONTCALM COUNTY



Map 2: Montcalm County Railroad lines circa 1920. ©Meints 2005

GR&I-N = Grand Rapids and Indiana line N (Grand Rapids – Mackinaw)

GTW-M = Grand Trunk Western line M (Ashley – Muskegon)

PM-G = Pere Marquette line G (Edmore- Elmdale – Freeport)

PM-I = Pere Marquette line I (Grand Ledge – Ionia – Howard City)

PM-J = Pere Marquette line J (Ionia- Edmore- Big Rapids)

PM-V = Pere Marquette line V (Saginaw –Edmore- Howard City)

Introduction

Montcalm county and its relationship with the railroads is not unlike that of many counties in the state. Where once a person would be hard pressed to go far from a place where the train whistle was within earshot, now a person could travel 50 miles and never pass over a train crossing. At one time the railroads in Montcalm County and throughout the growing United States were a basic part of the American infrastructure in the same way that highways are today, but now they serve as streamlined auxiliary modes of transporting freight, or government subsidized mass transit systems. The devolution of the railroads is what makes them interesting today. It is the reason why old-timers tell nostalgic stories about the old steam engines that rolled through their backyards; it is behind the memories of clothes being blackened out on the line from the thick smoke, and it is the reason I chose to research the topic. How does it affect a society when its infrastructure is completely overhauled? Does the disappearance of the railroads foreshadow the changes coming to the current system of transportation due to rising fuel costs and government inefficiency? These are some of the questions we have to ask ourselves when we look for relevance in studying the history of railroads in Michigan.

Montcalm County once had hundreds of miles of busy tracks for over 50 years which were all relatively silent by the mid 1970's. At one point 20 trains a day passed through places like Howard city¹ and school children could rely on a morning train to take them to school for a 10¢ fare.² Therefore Montcalm is a perfect microcosm of the overall reduction in railways in the state, and by examining the rise and fall of the railroads in Montcalm County the story of the slow death of what was once a colossal part of life for most people and communities will be told.

¹ *The Railroads of Montcalm County*, ed. Montcalm County Comprehensive Information System, Greenville, MI. (1999).

² *Wyman Centennial: 1879-1979*, ed. Vivian Johnson and Ida Peterson, (1979), 62.

Overview³

Although the first railway line in Michigan was built in 1836 by the Erie and Kalamazoo and was made of wooden rails that utilized teams of horses to pull its cars, it was much later in the rapid evolution of the railroads that Montcalm County saw its first track.⁴ That first track was part of the post Civil-War railroad boom that spread across the nation and many thousand miles of track would soon be haphazardly laid in the county. At the end of the Civil War, Michigan had less than a thousand miles of track but by 1890 there was close to ten thousand miles of track in the state.⁵ Montcalm County's railroads were part of this boom. The Grand Rapids & Indiana (GR&I) reached Pierson in the western panhandle of the county in 1869 on its way to Petoskey and eventually Mackinaw.⁶ Within a few years of the laying of this first railroad, the county would be traversed from south to north and east to west by a slew of new railroads looking to exploit the vast tracks of timber in central and northern Michigan.

The benefits of having a railway through a town were apparent to the people in the county very early in its settlement. The period after the Civil War saw towns doing battle for proposed railway lines. Communities in Michigan invested heavily, buying stock in railroad companies that promised to build through their town and Montcalm County communities were no exception. In the late 1860's and early 1870's the communities of Stanton and Greenville had such a battle. Stanton was the county seat but Greenville was the area's lumber hub sitting on the Flat River, an important vein in the Grand Valley lumbering network. Both communities

³ In order to avoid confusion, the designators used in Map 2 will appear next to railways that were once or later owned by other companies. Examples: Ionia and Stanton (PM-J), Toledo, Saginaw, & Muskegon (GTW-M).

⁴ Willis F. Dunbar, *All Aboard!: A History of Railroads in Michigan* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 127-28.

⁶ Elsie McNiel, "History of Area Railroads," *The Daily News*, (Greenville, MI) February 24, 1970 as compiled in *The Collection of Material from the Flat River Historical Museum Records at the Flat River Community Library*, 1995, 1341-9.

sought a link with the Ionia and Lansing (I&L), a line ending in the city of Ionia thirty miles south of both towns. The wealthy lumber interests of Greenville were able to secure the line from Ionia (PM-I) three years before Stanton would gain its connection (PM-J).⁷ The rivalry continued as Greenville was urged by the Rockford and Alpena in January of 1873 that if they did not put up the money to help build a railroad, they would lose “prominence” and be overtaken by the new Ionia and Stanton (PM-J).⁸ The rivalry finally died down when the I&L built a line from Greenville to Stanton (PM-G) in 1876 which made additional railroad service less of a priority.⁹ The historian Willis Dunbar sums up the mood of this period for Michigan communities like this: “Every city, town and hamlet sought a railroad, for it was universally believed that without one a community had little hope of growth. Towns that had grown to considerable size in pioneer days withered and died when the railroad bypassed them.”¹⁰ Many towns like Carson City, Edmore, and Howard City prove Dunbar’s remark and others like Westville and Entrican prove it by their status as ghost towns.

What did Montcalm County offer the railroads? Montcalm County was still relatively unsettled by the end of the Civil War yet a few daring pioneers were making attempts to clear land and engage in subsistence farming. The roads were very crude and unlike the southern portion of the state, Montcalm and counties to the north had very few roads that offered stagecoach service. Not surprisingly, lumber was the early impetus for investment in the area. The first lumber mill in the county was erected in Pine Township near Langston in either 1851 or

⁷ *Greenville Independent*, April 13, 1869, as compiled in *The Collection of Material from the Flat River Historical Museum Records at the Flat River Community Library*, 1995.

⁸ *Greenville Democrat*, January 25, 1873. As compiled in *The Collection of Material from the Flat River Historical Museum Records at the Flat River Community Library*, 1995.

⁹ Graydon M. Meints, *Michigan Railroad Lines*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2005), 415.

¹⁰ Dunbar, 127.

52 by the John Green Company.¹¹ The expansion of the industry spread rapidly and at the height of the lumber boom in Montcalm County there were hundreds of small mills, 42 lumber and shingle mills near Stanton alone.¹² The growth and volume of the industry can be seen in examining the log drives in the area. In 1866 three million feet of logs were driven down the Flat River from Greenville, the next year thirty million feet, and by 1881 one-hundred and sixty-five million feet of logs were floated down the river at the apex of the log drives.¹³ No doubt spurs and narrow gauge “tramways” that weaved their way through the tall pine forests of the county and fed the main lines had something to do with the increase in volume. In places like Six Lakes and Lakeview tracks were even laid across the ice in winter to transport the logs.¹⁴ A white pine stump pulled in 1920 in Douglas Township had a diameter of over seven feet across such was the character of lumber stands in the area.¹⁵ The coming of the lumber industry provided the motivation to create Montcalm County’s first modern transportation network as other railways were built across the countryside.

Soon, two other main lines were established that crossed the county horizontally. The first of these was the Chicago, Saginaw, & Canada (PM-V) which made its way from Riverdale to Cedar Lake in 1875 and was completed through the northern townships of the county to the GR&I in Howard City.¹⁶ The PM-V and GR&I operated as feeder lines for the Michigan Central

¹¹John W. Dasef, *History of Montcalm County, Michigan*, (Indianapolis: B.F. Bowen & Company, 1916), 203.

¹² *Central Michigan Historical Society: Bicentennial Edition*, (1976), 16.

¹³ *A History of the Greater Greenville Area 1844 to 1994: Special Sesquicentennial Edition*, ed. Flat River Historical Society, (Greenville, MI: Flat River Historical Society Publishing, 1994), 4.

¹⁴ According to Marlene Gilbert and Barry Wood there is a narrow gauge locomotive at the bottom of First Lake in Six Lakes to this day!

¹⁵ Clarence and Harriet Olsen, “from *When Pine was King*,” in *Central Michigan Historical Society: Bicentennial Edition*, (1976), 4.

¹⁶ Meints, *Michigan Railroad Lines*, 49.

system.¹⁷ The second line came across the southern townships from Ashley in neighboring Gratiot County to Greenville by 1887. This was the Toledo, Saginaw & Muskegon (GTW-M) that was under the control of the Grand Trunk of Canada system.¹⁸ These new lines in addition to the northern extensions of the existing Stanton and Greenville lines and the GR&I made up Montcalm county's "main" lines.

These main lines stayed on long after the area's lumber boom with its tramways and narrow gauge tracks having been ripped up and carried north with it. The county then fell back on other industries and agri-businesses that were made viable by the railways. Unlike the counties further to the north with their ashy spodosols, the alfisols and loamy soils of Montcalm County could support intensive agricultural cultivation. The pine stumps were cleared and vast portions of the county produced potatoes and grains. Towns like Vestaburg, Lakeview, Edmore, Carson City, Six Lakes, and Stanton built large elevators next to the tracks that filled boxcars bound for places all over the state. Many of these towns still have these elevators with their railroad car chutes rusting at their hips. Other towns like Sheridan and Wyman were in the dairy and cattle business. Milk from around the county was once shipped via the railroad to Sheridan and its Carnation condensed milk plant and Wyman was once the home a large stockyard of beef cattle.¹⁹ Flour and refrigerator units were shipped from Greenville as early as 1892. The Ranney (later Northland) and Gibson (later Frigidaire) refrigeration companies helped establish Greenville as the industrial hub of the county and they relied heavily on railroads to export their products before quality automobile roads came to the area after WWII.²⁰ The railroads came for

¹⁷ Graydon M. Meints, *Michigan Railroads & Railroad Companies*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1992), Map insert of "Michigan Central and Connecting Lines".

¹⁸ Meints, *Michigan Railroad Lines*, 217.

¹⁹ *Wyman Centennial: 1879-1979*, 63.

²⁰ *History of the Greater Greenville Area*, 4.

the lumber and thoroughly helped extract as much as they could from the region but the railroads did sustain themselves in the county for another forty to fifty years by other means.

At this point a brief history of each main line in Montcalm County is necessary. First it must be understood that railroad companies in Michigan and everywhere else have a long complicated history of being chartered, sold, consolidated, placed with a receiver, reorganized, or just going under, never to be heard from again. Each of the railroads in Montcalm County went through some or all of these processes through out their roughly century long history. Each of the railroad lines in the county also had their share of accidents and incidents with the law, and each were subject to changes in legislation, or broader financial down turns that hampered their local business in some fashion. By examining the life and death of each of these lines a clearer picture of the downscaling of railroads in Michigan as a whole will develop.

Grand Rapids & Indiana R.R.

As mentioned above, the GR&I was the first railroad constructed in Montcalm County and it ran a mere 12.5 miles through the extreme western pan-handle situated between Kent and Mecosta Counties.²¹ The GR&I company was chartered in 1855 and in 1857 consolidated the Grand Rapids & Fort Wayne and Grand Rapids & Mackinaw, the latter being the line slated for construction through Montcalm County.²² The company eventually built the 19.2 mile section from Cedar Springs (Kent County) to Morley (Mecosta County) through Montcalm County in 1869 and reached the Straits of Mackinaw in 1888 when the company acquired the Bay View, Little Traverse & Mackinac line.²³ Even though the GR&I had the least amount of track in the county, it had the distinction of having the most deadly railroad accident in the county. On the

²¹ John W. Dasef, *History of Montcalm County, Michigan*, (Indianapolis: B.F. Bowen & Company, 1916), 277.

²² Graydon M. Meints, *Michigan Railroads & Railroad Companies*, 78.

²³ Ibid.

foggy morning of August 15, 1900 the GR&I's new Mill Creek (Kent County) operator was not at his post when the northbound "Flyer" No.5 Engine 70 came past his depot. The dispatcher at Howard City to the north was holding the south bound train No. 2 Engine 68 on a siding. When the dispatcher telegraphed the Mill Creek operator to see if the No. 5 had passed the operator told him that it had not passed when in fact had passed while he was away from his post. Thinking that the southbound train then had time to proceed south to the next siding, the operator let the southbound train leave Howard City. Just north of Pierson the two trains collided head on in the fog killing 7 people and injuring many others. Among the dead were the engineers and firemen of each train, a well liked conductor, a 50 year old passenger, and the 10 year old son of a baggage man.²⁴ Seven dead might seem like a low number considering that both trains were heavy with passengers going to or from the vacation areas of the north, but it is important to note that trains of the time typically did not go very fast, especially through dense fog. Still the damage was extensive as both boilers exploded sending shrapnel and the dead were "frightfully mangled."²⁵

Like all railroads in the county the GR&I hauled its share of freight, but it was especially important for getting people to the northlands of Michigan. The GR&I company, like other railroad companies that went through northern Michigan, also had partial ownership of hotels in the north. Before 1909 the GR&I had a 1/6th share of the Mackinaw Island Hotel Company which owned the Grand Hotel and surrounding property.²⁶ Because of its direct connection to the north, passenger service from tourism was a much larger part of the GR&I service than for the other railroads in the county.

²⁴ "Train Wreck at Pierson, Michigan on the Grand Rapids and Indiana Railroad." ed. Richard Lemon, as collected from *The Grand Rapids Herald*, August 15-17, 1900.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ John W. Dasef, 278.

Though the line kept its name as the GR&I, the company itself passed into many hands. In 1874 it was bought by the Pennsylvania Railroad Company which in turn merged into the Pennel Company in 1953 which became the Penn Central in 1968.²⁷ By the mid 1960's its owners were petitioning to abandon the 225 miles of track north of Sand Lake (Kent County) but were turned down by local interests groups supported by the State Attorney General Frank Kelley (b. 1924).²⁸ In 1976 Conrail bought Penn Central and gained control of the line and sold 186.5 miles from Comstock Park to Petoskey to the State of Michigan in 1984.²⁹ The last activity Graydon Meints documents in his book *Michigan Railroad Lines* written in 2005 shows that the line was sold to the Norfolk Southern Railroad Company in 1999 but as of 2010 this line has been abandoned, torn up for scrap, and converted to a recreational trail.³⁰ The GR&I had the longest spell of any of the railways in Montcalm County from 1869 to at least 2005 when it still had rail and a right-a-way across M-46 near the intersection with old 131 (Federal Road) but it could not escape the fate of the other railways in the county as car and air travel made this line obsolete as well.

Grand Trunk Western R.R.

In contrast to the GR&I-N line which enjoyed a relatively long and profitable life, the GTW-M line arrived in the county as the last “main line” in 1887 and became one of the first to become partially abandoned west of Greenville in 1946.³¹ The Grand Trunk Railway Company of Canada (head quarters in London, UK) controlled the Toledo, Saginaw & Muskegon Railway Company (TS&M) chartered in 1886, and opened its Ashley to Carson City line in September of

²⁷ Meints, *Michigan Railroad Lines*, 185.

²⁸ Dunbar, 281.

²⁹ Meints, *Michigan Railroad Lines*, 185.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Dunbar, 280-81.

1887, reaching Muskegon by August of the next year.³² The line competed with parallel lines to the north and south and in 1913 operated at a deficit of \$57,739.³³ The other lines were the PM-V in the north of the county and the GTW line from Owosso to Grand Rapids in the south. Both of them serviced towns of greater importance than the GTW-M line. It also did not help the GTW-M that it passed through an area that had already seen the end of its logging boom and small farming communities like Carson City, Butternut, and Vickeryville had little to offer in the way of freight or passengers. Sheridan and Greenville were already serviced by the lines that would become the Pere Marquette System and their business would have to be shared.

The GTW-M line officially changed from the TS&M to the GTW-M when the Grand Trunk Western Railway Company charter was granted in Detroit in 1900 at the price of \$6,000,000.³⁴ This company put all the separate railway companies that were controlled by Grand Trunk Railway Company in Michigan and other parts of the United States under one company. In 1971 the company went under the control of the Grand Trunk Corporation and it was under this ownership that the 21.1 miles between Greenville and Carson City were abandoned in 1983.³⁵ Here again Meints's 2005 work does not refer to further abandonment between Carson City and Ashley in Gratiot County. There is still track in Carson City that is most likely not owned by the Grand Trunk Corporation any longer next to the old Kellogg elevators. The line does cross US. 127 just north of M-57 in Gratiot County but does not reach Montcalm County, stopping at the corn silos of Middleton. Unlike the GR&I and parts of the Pere Marquette lines, the old GTW-M was not converted into trails but has been mostly plowed under into open farmland.

³² Meints, *Michigan Railroads & Railroad Companies*, 146.

³³ John W. Dasef, 277.

³⁴ Meints, *Michigan Railroads & Railroad Companies*, 84.

³⁵ Meints, *Michigan Railroad Lines*, 217.

Pere Marquette R.R.

The Pere Marquette railways were the most extensive in Montcalm County and took the largest share of the local freight and passenger service. According to Elsie McNiel of Greenville's *Daily News*, from 1899 to 1931 the Pere Marquette Railroad Company consolidated over 80 different companies into its system.³⁶ Each one of Montcalm County's Pere Marquette Lines were once owned by smaller railroad companies long before the Pere Marquette Company was created by the consolidation of the Flint & Pere Marquette, Detroit, Grand Rapids & Western, (which owned the tracks in Montcalm County at the time) and the Chicago & West Michigan in November of 1899.³⁷

The first line that would later be a part of this system was the PM-I that was mentioned above and reached Greenville in 1870. Initially this was the Ionia & Lansing Railroad Company but soon it was consolidated with the Detroit, Howell & Lansing to form the Detroit, Lansing & Lake Michigan (DL&LM) Railroad Company.³⁸ With the exception of the PM-V line, all of the other P.M. lines that were constructed from south to north were owned by the DL&LM until this company merged with the Ionia and Lansing to form the Detroit, Lansing and Northern (DL&N) Railroad Company in 1876.³⁹ Under the ownership of the DL&N the PM-J line was completed through the county to Blanchard in Isabella County by 1879.⁴⁰ The PM-G, J, and I that were owned by the DL&N consolidated with other companies to become the short lived Grand Rapids

³⁶ McNiel, 1341-9.

³⁷ Meints, *Michigan Railroads & Railroad Companies*, 126.

³⁸ John W. Dasef, 279.

³⁹ Meints, *Michigan Railroad Lines*, 415.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 418.

& Western Railroad Company in 1896 that in turn was consolidated further as mentioned above to form the Pere Marquette Railroad Company in 1899.⁴¹

The PM-V line started out as the Chicago, Saginaw, & Canada (CS&C) and was built from Riverdale in Gratiot County to Cedar Lake in 1875, extended to Edmore in 1878, to Lakeview in 1879 and reached the GR&I at Howard City by 1886.⁴² The bank foreclosed on the CS&C in 1883 and control of the line went to the Saginaw & Western (S&W) Railroad Company which completed the section from Lakeview to Howard City.⁴³ Upon incorporation in 1883 the S&W was controlled and then leased by the DL&N which ultimately led to its inclusion in the Pere Marquette System by 1899.⁴⁴

Since the Pere Marquette lines were the railroads that touched nearly all Montcalm County communities, they are the subject of most of the old yarns about the railroads. In his recollection to *The Daily News* reporter Rosemary Horvath in a piece looking back at the railroads in 2000, local attorney Homer Miel (1907-2006) said:

Two Trains stopping in Stanton six times a day made travel easy. The Pere Marquette Railroad Company operated a line from Ionia to Howard City, where it connected to the Grand Rapids and Indiana. The train circled back through Gowen, Trufant, Coral and Greenville. Two trains ran from Saginaw to G.R. stopping every weekday morning, afternoon, and evening. But trains did not run on Sundays. We walked to McBride or to Sidney and back. I walked from Edmore to Stanton (8 miles).⁴⁵

Elsie McNiel wrote that during the 1920's the young men of Greenville enjoyed riding the Saturday night train to Belding to dance with the "silk mill girls" and that the fare to Grand

⁴¹ Ibid., 415.

⁴² Ibid., 410.

⁴³ *Michigan Railroads & Railroad Companies*, 50.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 134.

⁴⁵ Rosemary Horvath, "Stanton is a Main Railway Hub," *The Daily News*, January 1, 2000, sec. 2, 7.

Rapids was only 74¢.⁴⁶ In contrast to all the fond memories of the railroads there were also many tragic and dangerous tales along the Pere Marquette lines in Montcalm County. The sparks from steam engines routinely ignited surrounding buildings and the railroads brought petty criminals in the form of hoboes to the small towns in the county and as automobile traffic increased, train/car collisions started to become more frequent. The railroad employees sometimes partook in petty crimes. In one rather comical example in 1914, an engineer for the P.M. was forced to pay a fine of \$50 after being caught stealing dogs and selling them up and down the railway lines.⁴⁷ On the tragic end, six were killed and 15 injured when a P.M. gravel train hit a beech tree across the tracks near Trufant. The engine was pushing the cars and therefore could not see the tree.⁴⁸ By looking at the collections and memories that I found about railroads in Montcalm County it is apparent that the Pere Marquette Railroad was by far the railroad the people of the county most identified themselves with. Even so, the P.M. lines went through consolidation and abandonment like the other lines of the county.

The story of the Pere Marquette lines march to consolidation and abandonment within Montcalm County starts in 1929 when control of the company was handed over to the transportation giant Chesapeake & Ohio (C&O) and in 1947 the Pere Marquette Railroad Company was formally merged with C&O.⁴⁹ In 1973 the Chessie System, Inc. took control of C&O and then merged with other large transportation systems in 1980 to form the CSX corporation.⁵⁰ During this period of consolidation much of the Pere Marquette track was abandoned and eventually tore up. The PM-J was abandoned from south to north up to Stanton

⁴⁶ McNiel, 1341-10.

⁴⁷ *Greenville Independent*, March 11, 1914.

⁴⁸ Sandy Main, "Train Wrecks have Tragic Results," *The Daily News*, (Greenville, MI. January 1, 2000), sec. 1, 10.

⁴⁹ Meints, *Michigan Railroads & Railroad Companies*, 126.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

by 1933 and to Blanchard in Isabella County by 1943.⁵¹ The PM-V was abandoned from Howard City to Lakeview in 1943, from Lakeview to Edmore in 1974, and from Edmore to Elwell in Gratiot County in 1988.⁵² The PM-G was abandoned between Edmore and North Greenville in 1988 as well.⁵³ The PM-I was abandoned in 1943 at a time when Dunbar says “The Pere Marquette (controlled by C&O) divested itself of almost sixty miles of lines in Montcalm and Mecosta counties.”⁵⁴ Though the PM-I between Howard City and Greenville was tore up, the line going south into Ionia County was bought in 1987 from CSX by a rare local railway company called Mid-Michigan Railroad, Inc. which provided service to large Greenville factories like Federal Mogul and Frigidaire until the closure of the Frigidaire plant in 2005.⁵⁵ Through observation I have noted that no part of the PM-I has rail remaining in Montcalm County and part of the grade within the city of Greenville is a paved bike trail. With that last wimper, the Pere Marquette railways that once provided the county with its freight and passenger service that crossed the whole area joined the other lines in becoming just a memory.

Aftermath

So what is left of Montcalm County’s railroad heritage? It has already been mentioned that with the exception of a small closed off portion of what was once part of the GTW-M in Carson City, all of the T-rails and railroad ties in the county have been torn up. In fact, in the early 1980’s my parents bought some ties that were being sold on the side of the highway from the PM-V near Edmore to use for a turn around in our driveway. Surprisingly there are some bridges that survive sporting only the rotting ties which at one time supported thousands of tons

⁵¹ Meints, *Michigan Railroad Lines*, 418.

⁵² Ibid., 410.

⁵³ Ibid., 415.

⁵⁴ Dunbar, 280.

⁵⁵ Meints, *Michigan Railroad Lines*, 365.

of freight a day. Two of these can be found on private land between Six Lakes and Edmore and were used by people on snowmobiles and 4-wheelers until the property owners erected wood barricades to prevent trespassing. Most of the grades still remain relatively intact throughout the county but where they intersect farmland they have been plowed under. As for the old small-gauge lumber tracks or “tramways,” there is little evidence of their existence.

A project that has utilized some of the old grades in the county is the conversion of these grades to recreational trails used for biking, walking, or recreational vehicles. The longest of these projects in Montcalm County is that of the Fred Meijer Heartland Trail which blacktopped the PM-G⁵⁶ from Lake Road near Greenville east to Edmore with plans to join it to a paved section on the PM-V grade from Riverdale to Alma in Gratiot County.⁵⁷ While the paved sections of the Heartland Trail do not permit motor vehicles, the old G.R. & I. grade is not paved in Montcalm County and is part of a multi-county recreational vehicle trail system. These “rails for trails” as they have been called might not carry trains today but at the very least, these trails still give the public the opportunity to follow in the footsteps of the old trains and contemplate a distant era.

Though there are physical reminders of the railroads in the county, much of what is left of the railroads is what is left behind with the county’s people. People who miss the whistles, bells, and plumes of smoke or even the rumble of the ground as a train passed. Since the rails have been quiet in this county for almost 40 years, there are fewer and fewer people who remember a passing train as an everyday occurrence. Those people would have had to live in the early 1950’s before the post-WWII decline of the railroad. Some of them have gotten together to

⁵⁶ The grades for the Fred Meijer Heartland Trail were bought from CSX. Montcalm County Community Information Center, *Fred Meijer Heartland Trail*, <http://www.montcalm.org/mapshome.asp#INLINK001>.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

preserve the railroad heritage of the county by compiling newspaper clippings and photos in collections like the one found in the Flat River Community Library in Greenville. One group on the campus of Montcalm Community College built Heritage Village, a 19th century village that includes a locomotive, caboose, and the old McBride P.M. depot complete with a watering tower and maintenance of way (M.O.W.) shed. The Six Lakes depot is now the Six Lakes Museum and though it is only open at special times, it has a wonderful display of the lumbering and railroad history of the area. Judging by the time and money that made these collections possible, it is clear that the railroads are still of major interests to many people in the area.

Conclusion

It is hard for the old timers of Montcalm County to imagine their lives without the railroads. In our time, look at the gas prices, wastefulness, and greed of our society and ponder if someday we will live in a country where automobiles have become impractical or obsolete. The streamlined train service of today still performs a valuable function and contributes to the infrastructure of the nation, but it is no longer the beast that opened up the nation like it was in the late 19th century. The decline of the railroads in Montcalm County can teach us many valuable lessons about the past and future of Michigan. For instance, we can see how many of our own communities came into being because of the railroads. We can also see that when change becomes a necessity it can take a long time to adapt. The railroads might be extinct in Montcalm County but they are not extinct in Michigan, they have just been scaled back from excess to necessity. Is this the future of our current transportation system? Can we count on a new mode of transportation that will get us through another century? These are the questions that should be considered with the decline of the railroads in mind. The post Civil-War railroad

boom over extended the railway system in the U.S. and it eventually had to chew off its limbs to survive. Might we look back at our current system and see the same?

Bibliography

- A History of the Greater Greenville Area 1844 to 1994: Special Sesquicentennial Edition.* Edited by Flat River Historical Society. Greenville, MI: Flat River Historical Society Publishing, 1994.
- Central Michigan Historical Society: Bicentennial Edition.* 1976.
- Dasef, Hope. "From *The Stanton Depot*." In *Central Michigan Historical Society: Bicentennial Edition*. 1976.
- Dasef, John W. *History of Montcalm County, Michigan*. Indianapolis: B.F. Bowen & Company, 1916.
- Dunbar, Willis F. *All Aboard!: A History of Railroads in Michigan*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969.
- Edmore Centennial Book*. Edited by Edmore Centennial Inc. Shawnee Mission, KS: Inter-Collegiate Press, 1978.
- Greenville Democrat*. as compiled in *The Collection of Material from the Flat River Historical Museum Records at the Flat River Community Library*, 1995.
- Greenville Independent*. as compiled in *The Collection of Material from the Flat River Historical Museum Records at the Flat River Community Library*, 1995.
- Horvath, Rosemary. "Stanton is a Main Railway Hub." *The Daily News*, January 1, 2000, sec. 2, 7.
- Lakeview Area Centennial: 1867-1967*. Edited by The Centennial Book Committee. 1967.
- Main, Sandy. "Train Wrecks have Tragic Results" *The Daily News*, Greenville, MI. January 1, 2000, sec. 1, 10.
- McNiel, Elsie. "History of Area Railroads." *The Daily News*, Greenville, MI. February 24, 1970 as compiled in *The Collection of Material from the Flat River Historical Museum Records at the Flat River Community Library*, 1995.
- Meints, Graydon M. *Michigan Railroads & Railroad Companies*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1992.
- Michigan Railroad Lines*. Vol. 1. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2005.
- Montcalm County Community Information Center. *Fred Meijer Heartland Trail*.
<http://www.montcalm.org/mapshome.asp#INLINK001>.
- Olsen, Clarence and Harriet. "From *When Pine was King*." In *Central Michigan Historical Society: Bicentennial Edition*. 1976.

Six Lakes Centennial Book. Edited by Six Lakes Centennial Committee. Shawnee Mission, KS: Inter-Collegiate Press, 1979.

The McBride Area Centennial Book. Edited by McBride Centennial Staff. United States: Taylor Publishing Company, 1983.

The Railroads of Montcalm County. Edited by Montcalm County Comprehensive Information System. Greenville, MI. 1999.

“Train Wreck at Pierson, Michigan on the Grand Rapids and Indiana Railroad.” Edited by Richard Lemon. as collected from *The Grand Rapids Herald*, August 15-17, 1900.

Wyman Centennial: 1879-1979. Edited by Vivian Johnson and Ida Peterson. 1979.

Special Thanks to:

Marlene Gilbert, Barry Wood, and Mike Maxon for leads on information about area railways.



Image 1: Locomotive and depot display at Heritage Village on the campus of Montcalm Community College. The McBride depot was moved to the village in 1995 and the locomotive and tender was purchased from the Canadian National R.R. Photo by Michael J. Gilbert



Image 4: Looking west down the last tracks left in Montcalm County near the Kellogg Elevator in Carson City. One small electric engine is occasionally used to move materials around the elevator area. This was once part of the busy GTW-M line but now the track only extends to the village limits. Photo by Michael J. Gilbert



Image 5: The Carson City tracks are also occasionally used during Frontier Days by a local business man for passenger rides. Photo by Michael J. Gilbert



Image 6: Some of Montcalm County's old railway beds are used for bike trails. This photo is the old PM-G grade looking north from Stanton. Part of the Frederick Meijer Bike Trail, the grades of the PM-G and PM-V are slated to be paved from Lake Road near Greenville to Alma in Gratiot County. The old GR&I grade in the western part of the county is also used as a bike/snowmobile trail. Photo by Michael J. Gilbert



Image 2: Cover of magazine published by the Detroit, Lansing & Northern advertising the attractions of Greenville. Courtesy of the Flat River Community Library

Detroit, Lansing & Lake Michigan Railroad.			
On and after June 10, 1872, trains will run as follows:			
TRAINS GOING EAST.			
DEPART.	Mail.	Ev'ng Ex.	Thro. Frt.
Howard, - - -	6:20 A. M.	4:00 P. M.	2:40 P. M.
Coral, - - -	6:35	4:15	3:00
Maple Valley, - -	6:42	4:22	3:20
Trufant's, - - -	6:50	4:30	4:00
Oaywood, - - -	7:00	4:43	4:43
Greenville, - - -	7:20	5:00	6:00
Kiddville, - - -	7:35	5:15	6:30
Ionis, - - -	8:20	6:00	10:05
Portland, - - -	9:05	6:40	11:20
Lansing, - - -	10:30	8:10	1:45
Howell, - - -	11:55	9:40	5:00
Detroit, - - -	2:35 P. M.	11:50	10:00
TRAINS GOING WEST.			
DEPART.	Mail.	Accom.	Morn. Ex
Detroit, - - -	7:30 A. M.	3:50 P. M.	
Howell, - - -	9:50	6:20	
Lansing, - - -	11:35	8:10	
Portland, - - -	12:47 P. M.	9:25	
Ionis, - - -	1:25	10:05	7:10 A. M.
Kiddville, - - -	2:02		7:58
Greenville, - - -	2:22		8:15
Oaywood, - - -	2:34		8:30
Trufant's, - - -	2:46		8:45
Maple Valley, - -	2:54		8:55
Coral, - - -	3:00		9:00
Howard, - - -	3:15		9:15

Image 3: Early train schedule from Stanton station. Courtesy of the Flat River Community Library